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AUTHOR	Lumsden, Linda
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ABSTRACT

Not all schools and teachers maintain uniformly high expectations for all students. Evidence suggests that schools can improve student learning by encouraging teachers and students to set their sights high. This digest synthesizes recent research about teachers' expectations and the ways in which teachers' expectations affect student performance; the ways in which teachers' beliefs translate into differential behavior toward students; other factors that influence expectations of students; students' attitudes toward and perceptions of expectations; and the ways in which teachers can maintain high expectations. Because teachers' expectations for students tend to be self-fulfilling, teachers should regularly examine their own attitudes and beliefs and treat their students as if they already are eager learners. (Contains 11 references). (LMI)

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ERIC DIGEST

JULY 1997 NUMBER 116 EDO-EA-97-8

Expectations for Students

By Linda Lumsden

Nearly all schools claim to hold high expectations for all students. In reality, however, what is professed is not always practiced. Although some schools and teachers maintain uniformly high expectations for all students, others have "great expectations" for particular segments of the student population but minimal expectations for others. And in many urban and innercity schools, low expectations predominate.

Asa Hilliard III (1991) contends that "our current ceiling for students is really much closer to where the *floor* ought to be." Many believe there is great disparity between "what youngsters are capable of learning and what they are learning" (John Bishop 1989).

Evidence suggests that schools can improve student learning by encouraging teachers and students to set their sights high.

Do Teachers' Expectations Affect Student Performance?

The expectations teachers have for their students and the assumptions they make about their potential have a tangible effect on student achievement. Research "clearly establishes that teacher expectations do play a significant role in determining how well and how much students learn" (Jerry Bamburg 1994).

Students tend to internalize the beliefs teachers have about their ability. Generally, they "rise or fall to the level of expectation of their teachers.... When teachers believe in students, students believe in themselves. When those you respect think you can, *you* think you can" (James Raffini 1993).

Conversely, when students are viewed as lacking in ability or motivation and are not expected to make significant progress, they tend to adopt this perception of themselves. Regrettably, some students, particularly those from certain social, economic, or ethnic groups, discover that their teachers consider them "incapable of handling demanding work" (Peggy Gonder 1991).

Teachers' expectations for students—whether high or low—can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, students tend to give to teachers as much or as little as teachers expect of them.

A characteristic shared by most highly effective teachers is their adherence to uniformly high expectations. They "refuse to alter their attitudes or expectations for their students—regardless of the students' race or ethnicity, life experiences and interests, and family wealth or stability" (Barbara J. Omotani and Les Omotani 1996).

In What Ways May Teachers' Beliefs Translate Into Differential Behavior Toward Students?

Either consciously or unconsciously, teachers often behave differently toward students based on the beliefs and assumptions they have about them. For example, studies have found that teachers engage in affirming nonverbal behaviors such as smiling, leaning toward, and making eye contact with students more frequently when they believe they are dealing with high-ability students than when they believe they are interacting with "slow" students (Jerry Bamburg 1994).

Students who are perceived to be low in ability may also be given fewer opportunities to learn new material, asked less stimulating questions, given briefer and less informative feedback, praised less frequently for success, called on less frequently, and given less time to respond than students who are considered high in ability (Kathleen Cotton 1989).

In addition, instructional content is sometimes "dumbed-down" for students considered to be low in ability. Students in low groups and tracks are usually offered "less exciting instruction, less emphasis on meaning and conceptualization, and more rote drill and practice activities" than those in high or heterogeneous groups and classes (Cotton).

When teachers summarily categorize or label students, typically some students end up receiving "a watered-down curriculum and less intense—and less motivating—instruction" (Gonder).

What Other Factors May Influence What Is Expected of Students?

In the U.S., many subscribe to what Bamburg dubs a philosophy of "educational predestination." That is, innate ability is viewed as the main determinant of academic success. The role played by effort, amount and quality of instruction, and parental involvement is discounted (Bamburg).

Poor performance in school is often attributed to low ability, and ability is viewed as being immune to alteration, much like eye or skin

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color. Therefore, poorly performing students often come to believe that no matter how much effort they put forth, it will not be reflected in improved performance.

This view contrasts sharply with the predominant perspective in many other cultures, where hard work and effort are considered key to students' academic achievement. In these cultures, high expectations are maintained for all students, and if a student is not succeeding, it is attributed to lack of effort and hard work, not to insufficient intellectual ability.

Tracking and ability grouping can also affect expectations. A criticism of traditional tracking is that expectations for students as well as pace of instruction are reduced in lower ability groups. According to Stockard and Mayberry (1992), "A large number of studies from a wide range of years suggest that... ability grouping appears to be detrimental for low-ability students.... [and] impedes the progress of students in lower groups." Mixed-age and mixed-ability classes, in contrast, have been shown to improve achievement, perhaps in part because more is expected from students in such groups.

What Do Students Have To Say About What Is Expected of Them?

Although students may appear to accept or even relish lax teachers with low standards, they ultimately come away with more respect for teachers who believe in them enough to demand more, both academically and behaviorally.

In a recent national survey of over 1,300 high school students (Public Agenda 1997), teens were asked on questionnaires and in focus group discussions what they think of and want from their schools.

Teens' responses concerning what they want were clustered in three main areas:

- *A yearning for order.* They complained about lax instructors and unenforced rules. "Many feel insulted at the minimal demands placed upon them. They state unequivocally that they would work harder if more were expected of them."
- *A yearning for structure.* They expressed a desire for "closer monitoring and watchfulness from teachers." In addition, "very significant numbers of respondents wanted after-school classes for youngsters who are failing."
- *A yearning for moral authority.* Although teens acknowledged cheating was commonplace, they indicated that wanted schools to teach "ethical values such as honesty and hard work."

Similarly, when 200 middle school students in Englewood, Colorado, were surveyed about their most memorable work in school, they repeatedly "equated hard work with success and satisfaction. Moreover, they suggested that challenge is the essence of engagement" (Wasserstein 1995).

What Can Teachers Do To Maintain High Expectations for All Students?

Research has shown that teachers' expectations for students tend to be self-fulfilling. Therefore, Jere Brophy (1986) advises teachers to "routinely project attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and attributions. . . that imply that your students share your own enthusiasm for learning. To the extent that *you treat your students as if they already are eager learners*, they will be more likely to become eager learners."

Obviously, having high expectations does not magically equalize students' innate abilities and learning rates. To accommodate differences among students and help all students achieve mastery without resorting to watering down standards and expectations, teachers can manipulate three variables—time, grouping, and methodology (Omatoni and Omatoni 1996).

Preservice and inservice training can sensitize teachers to possible unconscious biases and heighten their awareness of the detrimental effects of holding differential expectations for students.

Teachers who view intelligence as dynamic and fluid rather than static and unchanging are less likely to have rigid preconceived notions about what students will or will not be able to achieve.

When teachers and administrators maintain high expectations, they encourage in students a desire to aim high rather than to slide by. To expect less is to do students a disservice, not a favor.

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